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ABSTRACT

This report summarizes the opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed by a review panel with regard to the performance of the United States Office of Education's 10 Technical Assistance Centers (TACs). Background information concerning the functions and major components of the TAC system and the methodology of the review is provided. Findings dealing with various aspects of the TAC system are briefly outlined. Aspects of the system considered include its activities, coordination, staff, interagency relationships, use by State education agencies, Federal monitoring, cost effectiveness, and continuation. Recommendations regarding the continuation, staffing, funding, and management of TACs are listed. (EB)

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Executive Summary

Performance Review of USOE'S ESEA Title 1 Evaluation Technical Assistance Program

Contract no. HEW 300-78-0355

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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Submitted by HOPE Associates, Inc.

PERFORMANCE REVIEW OF USOE'S ESEA TITLE I EVALUATION TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

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The opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this report are those of the Review Panel members and do not necessarily represent the views or policies of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

E X E C U T I V E S U M M A R Y

PERFORMANCE REVIEW OF USOE'S ESEA TITLE I EVALUATION TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

BACKGROUND

The Commissioner of Education is mandated to provide models for evaluating Title I programs and technical assistance to aid in the implementation of the Title I evaluation system. As members of an independent review panel, we were responsible for determining whether USOE adequately fulfilled its mandate for providing technical assistance and whether the structure and functions of the technical assistance program should be changed.

The USOE Technical Assistance Program for Title I evaluation consists of four components: ten regional Technical Assistance Centers (TACs), printed materials, presentations by USOE staff, and national workshops. Primarily because most of the Program's effort and cost are associated with the TACs, we decided to concentrate on them.

The first TAC contracts began September 30, 1976 and have been extended through September, 1979. The TACs provide services on request to State Educational Agencies (SEAs) and, at the discretion of the SEAs, to Local Educational Agencies (LEAs). Assistance is free of charge. It is directed toward reading and mathematics Title I program evaluation in grades 2 through 12. The TACs are prohibited from (1) conducting Title I evaluations for LEAs, (2) recommending specific tests, (3) advising on curriculum and programs, (4) representing state policies to LEAs, and (5) enforcing, interpreting, or advising on USOE policy.

METHODS

To evaluate the delivery of technical assistance for Title I evaluation, we visited all 10 TACs, about half of the 50 SEAs, and over one dozen key Federal personnel. We also conducted telephone interviews with staff from the remaining SEAs and with several other groups. Correspondence, logs, reports, and other documents were analyzed.

FINDINGS

We found many and varied views of the technical assistance support and services. The diversity in perceptions could not be explained by such simple characterizations as differences between large and small states or between program and evaluation managers. However, there appeared to be substantial agreement on the following points.

Purpose of Title I Evaluation

The major purpose of Title I evaluation and the Technical Assistance Program is seen as satisfying Congressional desires for summative information about Title I. In contrast, the views of Congressional staff and a careful reading of the legislation suggest there is also Congressional concern that Title I evaluation be used at the SEA and LEA levels for program improvement and accountability based on local needs.

Need for Technical Assistance

Many SEAs and LEAs would like more emphasis placed on quality control and on making evaluations useful at the local level. There is agreement on the continuing need to upgrade the capability of SEAs and LEAs in program evaluation so that evaluations are conceptualized and conducted in a manner that provides useful results at those levels. Extensive and frequent turnover of LEA Title I staff is considered a serious problem resulting in a continuing need for technical assistance on Title I evaluation.

Nature and Use of Evaluation Data

Better data on Title I impact are expected to result from the current evaluation system than from previous efforts. There has been an increased awareness of the need for quality control of Title I evaluation data. It is felt that technical issues with the evaluation models deserve continuing attention. However, the utility of the aggregated data, even if of high quality, was still questioned by many. No plans were uncovered for how the national data would be reported and used by the USOE Office of Evaluation and Dissemination (OED).

Technical Assistance Centers

General Comment. TAC operations are a reasonable fulfillment of the legislative mandate. TAC services appear to be conscientiously and intelligently provided.

Receptivity. The TACs are extremely well received. A large majority of SEA respondents like the present system and have no desire for change.

Activities. The average TAC generates roughly 1400 person-days of effort per year, of which 85 to 90 percent are devoted to technical assistance and the remainder to management, staff improvements, etc. The average TAC engages in over 100 days of workshops, somewhat more days of on-site consultation, and more than 1,000 telephone and correspondence contacts per year.

Coordination. The TACs are largely a decentralized system. Until recently, there was little inter-TAC coordination of activities, including those requiring specialized expertise or re-usable elements (e.g., development of workshop materials).

Staff. TAC staff are viewed by the SEAs as amenable, responsive, and competent. Many are considered by the TAC Directors, and by us, to be capable of conducting important research activities related to Title I evaluation and to be in an excellent position to do so. Many staff feel a need for increased opportunities for professional development.

Interagency Relationships. TAC negotiations with the states on the services provided have largely allayed fears of Federal intrusion. The TACs are seen as operating separately from USOE. Indeed, they are viewed by many as an extended arm of the SEAs. There is total agreement that different organizations should continue to handle technical assistance and enforcement.

Use by SEAs. There is variability among SEAs on how they use the TACs and in their need for technical assistance on the models.

Federal Monitoring. OED monitoring of the TACs is attentive, yet informal and unstructured. TACs are very pleased with the relationship they have with the OED and with their monitors. However, TAC quarterly reports lack uniformity, specially in effort and cost data.

Cost Effectiveness. Funding levels across TACs vary by a 10 to 1 ratio between highest and lowest funding levels ($1.7 million to $175 thousand per year) with little justification. This variability, combined with uneven documentation of effort, precluded us from carrying out the originally planned cost analysis.

Continuation. Views of the appropriate life-span of the TACs vary from two to five years or longer depending on whether the respondents see the TACs as primarily limited to helping in the implementation of the models or as offering a more varied array of services designed to meet other evaluation needs of the SEAs and LEAs.

Documentation

There are mixed reactions to the printed documents in the Technical Assistance Program. OED-commissioned documents are seen as having some utility; TAC produced workshop materials have been received very well; the newsletter edited and distributed by OED has not proven to be useful.

Recommendations

All except the final recommendation were made in an effort to polish a program that is working well.

Continuation of TACs

* Continue to contract on a 3-year cycle for technical assistance for Title I evaluation, following the general procedures developed for the present TAC system.

TAC Scope of Work

* Expand the TAC scope of activity to include technical assistance directed toward local program improvement. The intent is to provide an even balance between the Federal need for summative information through *reporting* and the local need for program improvement through *evaluation*.

* Encourage greater emphasis on staff development activities, particularly those that nurture the professionalism of the TAC staff.

* Recognize that research on Title I evaluation problems and issues is a permissible activity for TACs.

TAC Staffing

* Keep the present procedures for staffing TACs except greater consideration should be given for employing non-doctoral personnel as warranted.

TAC Funding and Management

* Develop and use a rationale for equitable (but not necessarily equal) funding of TACs from one region to another.

* Require uniform quarterly reports from the TACs and provide timely feedback to them based on each report.

* Establish a uniform and simple system of cost/effort reporting for individual TACs so that cost effectiveness of TAC services can be monitored.

* Enhance the unique capabilities of the TAC system through greater inter-TAC coordination.

Other Funding and Management Issues

* Coordinate, on a regional basis, funding of SEAs for Title I evaluation activities that supplement TAC services so that the differing needs of states within a region can be adequately met.

* Prepare a plan for reporting and use of Title I data at the Federal level.

Printed Documents

* Develop and manage printed documents in a systematic and cooperative manner so that the quality and cost efficiency of the Technical Assistance Program are enhanced.

Future Systems

* Investigate the possibility of systems that accommodate diverse state and local capabilities and needs with an expanded set of objectives for Title I evaluation technical assistance.

In our opinion, the present system of TACs has enough technical merit and demonstrated success to continue through the next contract period. Concurrently, the USOE can carefully investigate alternative systems that supplant or supplement the present system. In our report, four alternative methods for delivering technical assistance were sketched and, together with a modified version of the present system, were briefly discussed with respect to five global evaluative criteria.

On the one hand, it would be surprising to find that the TAC approach has been entirely abandoned in the Technical Assistance Program three years hence. On the other hand, it would be equally surprising to find that the TAC approach has not evolved by then into a more flexible and probably more complex system.